POLITICS • 7 MIN READ

Kash Patel's use of the FBI jet sparks outrage. Here's why he couldn't travel to the Olympics any other way

UPDATED 11 HR AGO

By Evan Perez

US Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Kash Patel looks on prior to the Men's Gold Medal match between Canada and the United States on day 16 of the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic games at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena on February 22, 2026 in Milan, Italy. *(Elsa/Getty Images)*

Top officials at FBI headquarters were tracking the outbreak of **violence in**

Mexico on Sunday after its military killed a drug cartel boss when social media erupted with viral images of Director Kash Patel chugging beer in the **locker room celebration** of the Olympic gold medal-winning US men's hockey team.

The FBI for days fought off criticism of the hockey-loving Patel's trip on the agency plane to Italy for what the bureau said was long-planned official business, which coincided with the medal round of play for Team USA.

On Tuesday, Sen. Dick Durbin took aim at Patel's trip in a letter he sent to the Government Accountability Office reporting that whistleblowers told him the director's past air travel caused delays in high-profile investigations. **In the letter**, the Illinois Democrat asked the GAO to include his whistleblower complaints into an investigation into Patel's plane travel and requested the Justice Department's Office of Inspector General open an investigation.

Durbin alleged in the letter that Patel's personal travel and priorities have caused delays or issues in high-profile investigations in the past — including in the aftermath of the Charlie Kirk assassination in September and the Brown University shooting in December.

The FBI has three jets based in Virginia for various operational purposes in addition to the director's travel, and a fleet of propeller aircraft stationed across the country for surveillance and emergency response missions.

"Unfortunately, as a credible source described to my staff, the tone was set early during Director Patel's tenure when he said in a meeting with the field offices last year, 'If you have golf, hockey, fishing, or hunting and beautiful sights, you're going to see a lot of me,'" Durbin wrote to the GAO. "As has been reported, the Director's frequent misuse of the FBI's Gulfstream jets for personal travel has even frustrated White House and DOJ senior staff."

Patel once criticized a past director for his air travel

Much of the criticism of Patel's Olympics trip centers on his use of an FBI Gulfstream jet for personal travel since taking office.

It's a criticism that has also dogged previous FBI directors, and earlier, attorneys general. And Patel himself, before becoming FBI director, criticized the use of the FBI plane by his predecessor Christopher Wray, suggesting it should be grounded.

"Chris Wray doesn't need a government-funded G-5 jet to go to vacation," Patel said when appearing on Glenn Beck's podcast in 2024. "Maybe we ground that plane — $15,000 every time it takes off."

But just like it wasn't up to Wray then, Patel doesn't have a choice in how he travels.

A post-9/11 government regulation requires the attorney general, and since 2011, the FBI director, to use government aircraft for all travel, including personal trips. The reason for the policy, according to the Justice Department, is that the president and other top officials must always have secure communications available with the FBI director and attorney general, in case of national security or other emergencies.

Since becoming director a year ago, Patel's trips to Nashville and other locations to visit his girlfriend, a golfing destination with friends and to attend hockey games have prompted criticism from Democrats who have demanded the FBI provide information about the use of resources.

"Mr. Patel, these planes are not yours. They are the property of the U.S. Government and are paid for by the American people," Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin and California Rep. Sydney Kamlager-Dove, wrote in a letter to Patel in December.

Patel and the FBI have defended the use of FBI aircraft, saying that he is complying with federal law that requires reimbursing the government the cost of commercial airline tickets for his personal travel. Critics note that operating the FBI aircraft costs tens of thousands of dollars, far exceeding a commercial ticket reimbursement.

For his visit to Italy for the Olympics last week, the FBI disputed a CBS News report that Patel was traveling to cheer on the men's hockey team and cited numerous meetings he was scheduled to have.

A person briefed on the trip told CNN said the visit to Italy included law enforcement meetings and official agreement signings, and had been long planned, well before the US hockey team had made it to the final round of competition.

In past years, the FBI has dispatched agents to observe Olympics security preparations. Recent FBI directors haven't personally traveled for those preparations.

Still, when Patel surfaced at the men's hockey final, there was little surprise. Patel has played hockey for years and is known to be a fan. He turned up with hockey great Wayne Gretzky for games where Washington Capitals star Alex Ovechkin tied and surpassed Gretzky's all-time goals record.

Inside the FBI, Patel's conduct has divided some employees. Some applaud Patel's embrace of bro culture, and his frequent rallying and boosting of their work. Others criticize the director's wearing of an FBI badge, despite the fact he's not an agent, and have found it embarrassing to see their leader swigging beer and using curse words in a viral hockey celebration video Sunday. Some are circulating AI-generated Youtube videos of Patel's **Olympics trip**, including one where a fictionalized version of the FBI director is seen dancing and spraying Champagne around the locker room.

The video of Patel's actual visit to the locker room, though, surfaced during in the hours after the game, as top officials were still working to assess safety issues for Americans in parts of Mexico, where cartel gunmen were roaming the streets setting fires to vehicles and buildings, according to a person briefed on the matter.

Vehicles drive past a charred bus the day after the Mexican army killed Jalisco New Generation Cartel leader Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, known as "El Mencho," in Guadalajara, Mexico, on February 23, 2026. (AP Photo/Marco Ugarte) *(Marco Ugarte/AP)*

A senior FBI official said the director was receiving regular updates Sunday about the situation unfolding in Mexico and the FBI has continued to provide necessary support.

The FBI last year sought to obtain a new long-distance aircraft, according to government bidding proposal records.

The proposal said the FBI required an "ultra-long-range business jet to enable rapid, global transport of Department of Justice personnel in support of counterterrorism efforts, high-risk operations, and other sensitive missions."

The request came amid a push by Dan Bongino, the former deputy FBI director, to also access government aircraft because of security concerns. Typically, deputy FBI directors don't automatically qualify for private plane travel.

Amid criticism over use of the jets, the Justice Department withdrew the request for proposals for a new plane about a month after it was issued. An FBI spokesman at the time said Bongino's travel wasn't the reason for the jet proposal.

Personal travel on the FBI jet is often met with criticism

Sen. Chuck Grassley for years has been a critic on the issue of using government jets for personal travel. The Iowa Republican wrote letters and excoriated former Attorney General Eric Holder and Wray for their use of the FBI aircraft. But at a hearing last fall where Democrats raised questions about Patel's use of the plane, he took aim at Patel's critics.

"I find it interesting that my Democratic colleagues seem to bring up your use of the Justice Department planes, yet my Democratic colleagues didn't seem too interested about my oversight of Wray's use of the plane," he said. "I didn't hear a peep. So, my Democratic colleagues need to be consistent."

Sen. Chuck Grassley swears in FBI Director Kash Patel during a hearing on Capitol Hill on September 16, 2025. *(Andrew Harnik/Getty Images)*

Patel welcomed the lifeline from the Senate Judiciary Committee chairman, interjecting that his use of FBI aircraft was less than that of his predecessors. He also claimed to be saving taxpayers money because instead of having the FBI plane fly from a hangar in Manassas, Virginia, to Ronald Reagan National Airport — he instead travels to Joint Base Andrews in Maryland to avoid landing fees.

"We take off and land at Andrews every single time because it's cheaper and we do so because it saves the taxpayers' dollars," Patel said.

Holder, the former attorney general who was the subject of criticism from Grassley and other Republicans, said he is struck by the silence from the same Republicans on Patel's travel. Holder said he still believes there's a legitimate need for FBI directors to travel on government aircraft for emergency secure communications reasons. But he believes Patel is abusing the privilege.

Holder told CNN in an interview that during his time as attorney general he replaced his family trips abroad to go to Martha's Vineyard instead.

"Can you imagine the clamor from Republicans if I used a government plane like Patel? All we get now is silence from them," Holder said.

CNN's Josh Campbell contributed to this report.

Search CNN...

Sign in

Live TV

Listen

Watch

World

US Politics

Business

Markets

Health

Entertainment

Tech

Style

Travel

Sports

Science

Climate

Weather

Winter Olympics 2026

Ukraine-Russia War

Israel-Hamas War

Features

Watch

Listen

Games

About CNN

Politics

FOLLOW CNN POLITICS

DOWNLOAD THE CNN APP

Download on the App Store GET IT ON Google Play

Terms of Use Privacy Policy Manage Cookies+ Ad Choices Accessibility & CC About Newsletters Transcripts

© 2026 Cable News Network. A Warner Bros. Discovery Company. All Rights Reserved.
CNN Sans ™ & © 2016 Cable News Network.